

**IN THIS ARTICLE**

*Expatriates, Predeparture Training,  
Cross-Cultural Training*

**JAPAN-BOUND U.S.  
MANAGERS HAVE TO BE TURNED  
UPSIDE DOWN AND SHAKEN  
GENTLY, SO THAT THEIR  
CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS WON'T  
GET IN THE WAY OF WORKING  
WITH THE JAPANESE.**

# Japan-Bound Training

Japan is not an easy place for non-Japanese to do business. According to John Condon in his 1984 book, *With Respect to the Japanese: A Guide for Americans*, "It is difficult to find on this earth a more homogeneous society, or one more exclusive. To be Japanese is to be born of Japanese parents, to look Japanese, to speak the Japanese language, and to act Japanese."

The economic and cultural differences between the United States and Japan are great. The stakes are high for U.S. companies trying to do business in Japan. Success or failure in Japan can have a major effect on a company's future, and a commitment to the Japanese market requires a major investment of time and money.

For one thing, supporting U.S. personnel in Japan is expensive. The going rate for keeping a U.S. manager and his or her family in Tokyo for one year is more than

**BY ERNEST GUNDLING**

several hundred thousand dollars. To ensure that employees get off to the best possible start on their important and costly missions to Japan, an increasing number of companies provide predeparture training.

The cultural differences that make it important to train U.S. managers for Japan also make the training a complex task. Americans and Japanese have different assumptions about training and learning, which are linked to crucial business attitudes and behaviors.

Trainers face this dilemma: To be successful, a training program for Japan-bound managers must respond to trainees' expectations, however culture-based they might be. At the same time, such a program also must challenge and expand on cultural expectations in a way that maintains trainees' trust and sustains their willingness to experiment with unfamiliar skills and behaviors.

## Assumptions and expectations

Americans tend to assume that there is naturally great diversity in both instructional methods and learning styles, and that no single type is inherently better or more valuable than the others. Trainers must be able to anticipate and respond to those assumptions and the expectations that they generate.

U.S. trainees want information and skills that are tied to specific objectives and that are based on their individual needs and their company's situation. They want training that is crisp and to the point, but they also appreciate an informal, humorous attitude on the part of the instructors. They expect trainers to be responsive to questions so that an exchange of ideas—a dialogue—can occur. Time is limited in U.S. firms; trainees are anxious to get to work. They assume that trial and error on the job will make up for anything they miss in the initial training program.

Such assumptions and expectations about training seem perfectly natural within a U.S. context, but they reflect broader attitudes and behaviors that can be major impediments to doing business in Japan.

**Specific objectives.** The U.S. emphasis on specific objectives that shows up in training also carries over into the negotiation room. That emphasis can lead U.S. managers to focus on the content of a particular business deal while neglecting the larger context.

Japan has been called a high-context society. Factors such as protracted relationship-building and the mutual exchange of background information are seen as common courtesy and common sense. A certain level of mutual comfort is generally necessary before substantive business discussions can proceed. Subjective factors such as character judgment and personal compatibility are as essential to closing a deal as are objective considerations about the content of the agreement.

**Individual needs.** Many U.S. businesspeople have a deeply held assumption that says individual tailoring and customization are desirable. That assumption can be useful for meeting the needs of a demanding Japanese customer, but it may also blind a U.S. manager to the strong desire of

Japanese staff members for a sense of group unity, purpose, and goals.

U.S. managers in Japan frequently underestimate the importance of moving as a group, which includes such personal lifestyle issues as work hours and dress style as well as such obvious group activities as regular staff meetings, after-hours socializing, and company outings.

Demonstrations of respect for the individual, a fundamental principle of many U.S.-based organizations, can leave Japanese employees with the empty feeling that everyone is going off in different directions.

**Crisp and to the point.** Japanese and U.S. managers often have radically different senses of pace. That difference can present a major stumbling block to satisfactory business discussions. It isn't a question of content, but of physical rhythm and timing.

A U.S. businessperson may view a discussion as crisp and to the point, while his or her Japanese counterpart perceives it as hurried and superficial. A typical Japanese often pauses during a conversation to think, to observe the other person, or to convey a nonverbal message. People from the United States tend to rush to fill these silent internals, missing important insights or feedbacks that can emerge after such pauses.

A leading Japanese ministry official advises Japanese negotiators to anticipate and take advantage of the headlong pace of their U.S. counterparts in order to wring concessions from them. "Your most powerful persuasive tactics will be your questions, silences, and delays," says the official. "All these tactics will elicit concessions from Americans. Their outstanding cultural characteristic is impatience, and they view concessions as a way to move things along more quickly."

**Informal or humorous.** Initial meetings between business contacts in Japan tend to be stiff and formal, with both sides following set patterns of behavior. The careful observance of these practices is seen as a sign of professionalism and good character. People who immediately shed their jackets and start wisecracking are out of place and out of order; they may quickly be judged as business and social liabilities.

**Questions and idea exchanges.** Everybody's equal, right? Not in Japan. Hierarchy is built into every type of instructional setting and business dealing. In Japan, teachers and instructors have respect and social status far above the status given to those in similar positions in the United States. Japanese audiences commonly avoid challenging or asking direct questions of such authority figures.

In a business meeting, questions or the exchange of opinions may or may not be appropriate, depending on the purpose of the meeting and age and rank of the people attending. If one's Japanese counterpart is significantly senior in age or rank, or if the situation is formal or ceremonial, the most appropriate form of conduct may be to say little and follow the lead of others.

When working with Japanese people, one must at all times be sensitive to physical location, hierarchical positions, and the Japanese imperative to "save face."

**Trial and error.** Japanese businesspeople may consider trial and error to be an unavoidable strategy when the basic variables of a situation are unknown. But every effort is made to get things right the first time.

In Japan, the first impression of a new business acquaintance can be important and enduring.

Companies in Japan are endowed with long memories, due to the relative stability of their personnel. A U.S. executive can undermine the effectiveness of an entire stay in Japan by making serious errors during the first few months on the job. The offense can be something as seemingly innocent as acting in a way that is perceived by a customer as arrogant, or singling out a bright young Japanese employee for public praise or promotion ahead of more senior colleagues.

The Japanese market is similarly unforgiving. Once a company pulls out of Japan, it's almost impossible for it to return.

The U.S. tendency to value diversity can cause problems in Japan. It can lead a U.S. expatriate manager to underestimate or misjudge the crucial Japanese value of cultural homogeneity. Many Japanese are conditioned from childhood to see themselves

and to behave as members of a homogenous race. U.S. managers must thoroughly understand that concept in order to successfully mix with Japanese colleagues and sell to Japanese customers.

The Japanese sense of their own uniformity and their cultural uniqueness must be taken into account—whether the U.S. company's business strategy deliberately trades on an image of foreign innovation adapted to Japanese tastes, or strives for an image of complete assimilation. The ultimate sign of success for a U.S. firm, according to a top recruiter for foreign companies in Tokyo, is the inaccurate perception by the general public that it is a "good Japanese company."

### **A model for Japan-bound training**

Training for Japan-bound U.S. managers should strike a balance that meets trainees' expectations and challenges them in a constructive way.

The following model for a training program involves several phases conducted over a period of one to three weeks by a bicultural team of U.S. and Japanese trainers. The stages overlap and aren't strictly sequential.

**Phase 1: monocultural rapport.** From the first phone contact, it's essential for the training organization to project an image of competence that meets the expectations of U.S. trainees. Phone manners, program literature, the trainers' advance knowledge of the trainees' organization, program design, and logistical arrangements all shape the initial impression and affect trainees' comfort level with the program.

Trainers should take special care when making the initial contacts. Business discussions should be conducted in a style that is familiar to U.S. trainees, in order to gain their trust and build rapport that will carry everyone through the later phases of the program.

**Phase 2: information and concepts.** In Phase 2, the trainer's presentations have several goals: to provide trainees with background information, to further establish the trainer's credentials, and to introduce concepts that will help trainees understand and meaningfully integrate the more experien-

tial aspects of the training.

During the discussion stage, the trainer has an opportunity to elicit and validate trainees' past experiences and the insights they've gained while working in the United States and in Japan. The trainer should assume that trainees are good at their professions. Whenever possible, the trainer should confirm and build on trainees' strengths.

**Phase 3: simulations.** Information alone isn't easily translated into the skills that U.S. managers seek and genuinely need for working successfully with the Japanese. A training program can be effectively structured around a carefully ordered sequence of simulated business situations based on trainees' descriptions of circumstances they'll face in Japan. Whether the situation is working with subordinates in the office, lobbying for proposals, meeting customers, or making social calls to neighbors, trainees generally appreciate the opportunity to practice key skills in a supportive, nonthreatening environment, before going on-line in Japan.

These simulations bring U.S. trainees face-to-face with Japanese trainers, who take on a variety of roles. Japanese employees of the trainees' own company or a different company may be included, if circumstances permit.

When trainers properly conduct simulations and debrief participants, trainees gain valuable experience and feedback. This feedback includes specific, concrete behavioral instruction that is closely tied to the concepts presented earlier in the training. It should cover "how to" and "why" as well as "how not to."

Many trainees say afterward that the simulations were indispensable—that they helped them to internalize the wealth of information about Japan, and prepared them for work with their Japanese colleagues.

**Phase 4: real time.** As the training program progresses and trainers and trainees get to know each other, interesting things begin to happen.

Trainees face a certain amount of stress as they practice new skills. To fit into a Japanese work setting, they may need to modify business skills that they value and behaviors to which they've grown accustomed.

This is the guts of Japan-bound training, because it's what U.S. expatriate managers will find in their workplaces in Japan—Japanese and U.S. businesspeople trying their best to work together in stressful environments. Trainers are people, too. The Japanese who play the trainees' counterparts have a whole range of cognitive, emotional, and intuitive reactions to the trainees' behaviors.

Trainers have to sort through and analyze their own reactions, and have to set priorities and decide what is useful and appropriate to share with trainees. Trainers must do this in a manner that is constantly positive and that may require trainers to put in many long hours outside the scheduled training time.

**Phase 5: summary and evaluation.** Most Japan-bound, U.S. managers are in the prime of their careers. They are used to being in control. Because the training involves unfamiliar skills, it's important to give trainees an opportunity to review key learning points and to restate them in their own words.

By the time trainees move on to their new, overseas assignments, they must, to some degree, assume the trainer's functions of observing and accurately interpreting Japanese patterns of behavior. And they should demonstrate the appropriate skills.

That transition from trainee to fellow Japan-specialist means that as U.S. managers work and live in Japan, cross-cultural trainers will have even more to learn from them. First, trainers will want to know whether they've been effectively delivering the U.S.-style part of the training. Beyond that, program graduates are an ideal source of advice about what information and simulations will be on target for future trainees, because they often know those people personally.

Trainers who have the opportunity to conduct follow-up training at trainees' worksites in Japan should recognize and begin with the trainees' growing expertise.

### **Typical mistakes**

Given the complexity of expatriate training programs, it's easy for training organizations to make mistakes along the way.

**Un-American.** The most basic error is to fail at the start to meet the cultural expectations of U.S. trainees. When you don't handle phone calls properly or send the training agenda on time, you create a negative impression. The structure of a Japan-bound training program makes the margin for error very slim.

Another source of difficulty lies in exposing trainees at an early stage to Japanese-style assumptions about training.

For example, a common assumption incorporated into many forms of education in Japan is that every learner should cover certain basic points in the same way. That view can be frustrating to many U.S. trainees, who expect training to be tailored and customized to fit their individual needs—especially those who believe they are already knowledgeable about Japan.

All members of the bicultural training team, including the Japanese who make initial trainee contacts, must be able to anticipate the expectations of U.S. trainees and respond in a way that puts them at ease.

**Too much, too soon.** The different phases of the training need to be blended carefully. Simulations and real-time interactions are powerful and effective learning devices, but they have to be used with care and sensitivity. Some trainees are cautious and prefer a more cognitive approach to learning, such as traditional lectures; others are already familiar with and open to experiential forms of training.

During the initial exchanges of information, it's crucial to watch carefully for trainees' attitudes and to proceed from phase to phase only with their expressed permission. Failure to do so may provoke strong negative responses.

In a worst-case scenario, a trainer may give improperly modulated behavioral feedback to a trainee who is unready or unwilling to hear it. That can have a devastating effect on the atmosphere of the entire training program. If that happens, the trainer must promptly correct the situation.

The trainer can smooth transitions from phase to phase in several ways. He or she can begin with relatively safe situations, encouraging trainees

to work together in pairs. Also, the trainer can offer only limited feedback at first so that he or she can gauge trainees' responses.

**Too little, too late.** If the training program is overly tailored to certain U.S. expectations—for instance, the notion that questions are appropriate at any time and deserve immediate, direct, and verbal answers—the Japanese members of a bicultural training team might complain that trainees are being spoon-fed or coddled. It's unnatural and ineffective for Japanese trainers to confine themselves completely to a U.S. style.

Merely passing on information about Japan—rather than allowing trainees to experience the realities of cross-cultural business dealings—can reinforce a bias toward conceptual discussion and debate. Such a bias can be detrimental to relations with Japanese counterparts. Trainees can read about Japan in books, but interaction with experienced Japanese trainers can provide a valuable foretaste of life in Japan and direct feedback on how their behavior might be perceived by Japanese colleagues. To omit this interaction or delay it for too long can make trainees dangerously overconfident.

U.S. businesspeople going to work in Japan for the first time face realities that aren't always comfortable. The layout and rules of the workplace are different, interpersonal relations follow an unfamiliar rhythm, behavior elicits unexpected reactions, and questions are seldom answered as one would like. It's the trainer's responsibility to expose trainees to the Japanese business atmosphere during the training and to help trainees begin to formulate and experiment with their own coping strategies.

**Too little empathy.** Trainees who think they're getting negative feedback without enough support or respect quickly become hesitant to try new skills. Many even turn defensive. An effective way to avert such a response is to assure them from the beginning that any mistakes they make are ones that the trainers have most likely made as well. The trainers' objective should be to get trainees off to a fast start by sharing what they have learned the hard way.

Providing high-quality training is exhausting. It requires trainers to get to know each trainee and to identify with each trainee's response to each new phase of the program. There's no substitute for genuine empathy and friendship, and for winning and keeping the trust of trainees. Empathy fosters a positive learning environment that encourages self-reflection and behavioral change.

### **Paradoxes and art**

One of the many paradoxes involved in training Japan-bound U.S. businesspeople is that there is a subjective foundation to the objective results that trainees desire. Key skills—such as building relationships, gathering information, holding successful meetings, negotiating, and satisfying Japanese customers—are based on a subtle meshing of assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors between U.S. managers and their Japanese colleagues.

U.S. trainees bring with them many cultural assumptions that can be obstacles to success in Japan. Fortunately, they also tend to bring with them a positive desire to be challenged and to learn something new. Most of these trainees are not happy unless they're being stretched—mentally and emotionally, objectively and subjectively.

If there is such a thing as the trainer's "art," it is to strike the right balance among the various phases of any training program. It's a delicate matter of sensitivity, experience, intuition, and humble empathy. To achieve this balance in training for Japan-bound U.S. managers, trainers must cooperate and work together in bicultural teams. As team members, trainers inevitably serve as models, so it is imperative that trainers practice what they preach.

U.S. trainees, who are plenty savvy, closely watch their instructors. The model that they provide is perhaps the strongest image that will remain in trainees' minds. The image need not be perfect, but it should be one worth remembering. ■

---

**Ernest Gundling** is an intercultural specialist with Clarke Consulting Group, Three Lagoon Drive, Suite 230, Redwood City, CA 94065.